

## Good Grief

sermon digest

April 6, 2014

Luke 13:31-35

larry dipboye

Nearly one-third of Luke's Gospel is devoted to Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Like Matthew and Mark, the story of Jesus turns on the confession of Peter (Luke 9:20). Following Peter's confession, "You are the Messiah," Jesus declares his destiny with rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection; and Luke (9:51) observes that this is the point when Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem." The two are synonymous: Jerusalem and the fulfillment of mission. Rejection, suffering, death, and ultimate victory have a location—Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is certainly Luke's obsession. It may be nothing more than a way to organize the material in his Gospel, but Luke is intentional about interpreting the life of Jesus as a final journey. In addition to several references to the City by implication, Luke names Jerusalem ninety times in his Gospel, almost twice the number of times Jerusalem is mentioned in the rest of the New Testament.

The journey to Jerusalem does not follow a clearly defined geographical path like you might get from Google Maps or AAA. New Testament scholar Frank Stagg (*Review and Expositor*, fall, 1967) noted that in Luke the journey is more like a lake spreading out in all directions than a river that follows a set path. As a place on the map, Jerusalem is more about destiny than destination.

You know the difference: A destination is a point along the way. It might consume your attention for awhile, but eventually you turn toward another place, a new destination. But destiny is the point of arrival. It is the consuming obsession of your life. It is the place where the whole journey of life finds fulfillment and meaning. Most of us go through life thinking that one place or another is our destiny, but circumstances change, a major crisis or the open door of opportunity arises and moves us on to another place on the road. We eventually learn to look at places with skepticism: maybe this is my destiny, or perhaps the journey of life is going to take me somewhere else that I never imagined. Perhaps every place is just a destination along the way; perhaps there is no single destiny that finalizes my life; maybe there is no destiny.

But, for Luke, Jerusalem was Jesus' destiny, the end of the journey set by his mission in life. For Jesus, Jerusalem was more than a city along the road, another stopping place in the journey of life. Especially in Luke, the Holy City of Jewish faith and history becomes a symbol of destiny. But the sense of destiny transcends the life and times of Jesus. Jerusalem was not only the destiny for Jesus in his journey toward the cross, it was the destiny of the Jews in the fulfillment of their Covenant with God and the destiny of creation when God finishes the new creation.

**Does God have a dwelling place?** Jerusalem has always been located at the center of Jewish history: the center of Jewish connection to the land of promise, the center of destiny as the People of God, and central to the covenant relationship with God. The physical boundaries of the nation changed with time and territorial struggle; but as long as Jerusalem stood, Israel stood as a beacon of light in the dark world of gentile domination. In Judaism, all roads led to Jerusalem. Positioned on Mount Zion, Jerusalem was the high place at the top of a mountain; theologically Jerusalem sat at the top of the world, and Zion would be the ultimate place of pilgrimage for all of humanity.

For Jews, it was the location of the Temple and the altar of sacrifice, the center of worship from the time of Solomon. The feast days of Jewish religion were celebrated in Jerusalem, drawing pilgrims from all of the outlying towns and villages within Israel's bounds. After the Jewish diaspora, the scattering of Jews throughout the gentile world and by the time of Christ, some Jews traveled from numerous places throughout the Roman Empire to participate in the festivals of worship. The miracle of tongues at the Christian Pentecost did not need the elaborate explanations that tend to dominate preaching today. First century Jews were aware of the multiple languages of the visitors to Jerusalem for any major feast. Although Jewish to the core, Jerusalem was a cosmopolitan city; and the Jews were becoming a cosmopolitan people.

**Can any city ever be holy?** Jerusalem came to be known as the Holy City of God. As Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, observed, Jerusalem was constructed by the Jews. The Temple was built by Jewish craftsmen. The walls were designed by and raised by the citizens of the City. When the walls were torn down the Temple destroyed, the people were called together to rebuild the Temple and restore the walls. Thus, Jerusalem was like all cities, a product of human effort, little different from

Corinth, Athens, Babylon, or Rome. But Jerusalem seemed to have a soul. This human city with all of its flaws and failings was destined to become the City of God. It was more than a place; it was the symbol of God's covenant extended to the ultimate reach to the world. Jerusalem was destined to become the family, the *koinonia* of God.

But Jesus seems to have a different vision. When warned by Pharisees that Herod Antipas, responsible for the death of John the Baptist, was out to kill Jesus, he waved off the warning. He would move on to the completion of his work the continuation of his journey, "because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem." Jesus had a memory as well as a vision. In his mind, Jerusalem was the notorious city responsible for terminating prophets and killing messengers from God. He lamented the history and expressed the heart of God's love in wanting to gather the people as a hen gathers her chicks under the wing, but "you were not willing!" Jerusalem was then and is now an enigma in conflict with the cross-cultural communities of which she is a part, thus, in conflict with herself. As Ellul would espouse, Jerusalem is neither Jewish nor Christian but always torn apart, going from one persecution to another.

Jacques Ellul explored the biblical meaning of the city, noting the root corruption of all of the cities of prominence found in the Bible. Noted among the first things in the Bible, Cain is the original murderer, who killed his brother Abel out of jealousy over Abel's superior sacrifice to God. Cain also stands as the first builder of a city. Cain's city becomes the Kingdom Nimrod and the location of the myth of Babel, the human attempt to construct a skyscraper reaching to the seat of authority in God. The center of evil in the Abraham saga is located in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Jonah is sent by God to redeem the evil city of Nineveh. The new Babel becomes Babylon, the Persian Capitol that takes down the tiny nation of Judah and destroys Jerusalem. In the Jewish mind, Babylon becomes something more than a geographical location where their ancestors spent fifty years in captivity. Babylon lies at the heart of evil. Evil not only has a definition that is found in anything or anyone that opposes the will and purpose of God in creation; evil is a place, a city where the demons of hell reside.

I grew up in a suburb of Houston, the largest city in Texas. But my parents were from the country. Dad was a farmer driven to the big city by the combination of the Great Depression and a World War. We lived in a small house where our neighbors were in easy listening distance from one another. I walked the half-mile to school and home every day and came to accept close living quarters, numerous stores, running water, and indoor toilets as a way of life. Periodically our family traveled back to rural Oklahoma where we began, and I got to know my country cousins, picking berries in the field, milking cows, fishing in creeks, bathing in outdoor tubs, and learning to operate outdoor toilets. I sort of grew up knowing that I lived in sin-city. God was found out among the trees and ponds of the rural landscape. The cities were places where crime, violence, and all manner of human evil dwelled. The country was where you could sleep at night behind unlocked doors, where neighbors took care of each other, where the real family roots could be found.

You don't have to be a sociologist to understand that higher population density leads to greater conflict. Ironically, living closer together does not mean that you have closer neighbors or that you care more for one another. Many big cities are lonely crowds where people are everywhere but friends are few and far between. I think that I can understand the good grief of Jesus for the people of Jerusalem. They lived in a city that symbolized the very salvation of God for all humanity, yet the pack mentality of Jerusalem was little different from most big cities; it was often cruel, mean-spirited, and hate-filled, the very opposite of the kind of salvation that Jesus taught.

**Hope lies ahead, not behind.** Yesterday, John Kerry was in the news announcing the suspension of peace talks between representatives of Israel and Palestine. I think that his announcement was an attempt to jolt the diplomats into becoming peacemakers, yet I am sure that he is disappointed and disgusted with the self-destructive energy that seems to emerge every time these two national neighbors try to get together. Jerusalem is still an embattled city wandering in the wilderness of international politics, religion, and culture. Jerusalem is claimed as a holy city by Judaism, some Christians, and Islam—the three Abrahamic religions. An uneasy coexistence of the three religions in Jerusalem is a reflection of the religious tensions around the globe.

Jesus lamented the state of Jerusalem as a last stop for prophets in Jewish history, but he also grieved his own approaching torture and death. Josephus writes of the crucifixion of 3,600 Jews outside the City of Jerusalem in the Jewish rebellion some thirty years after the crucifixion of Jesus. In the year 70, the future Emperor Titus snuffed out a four year Jewish rebellion against Rome. His Roman legions marched into Jerusalem destroying most of the city, including Herod's Temple, and killed tens of thousands of Jews in the streets. This event was the end of the Jewish State until the reestablishment of Israel following World War II. Perhaps Jesus foresaw the coming tragedy about to be visited on Jerusalem.

But I suspect that Jesus grieved then what we continue to lament today, the inability of people who claim to be children of God to live together in peace in God's world. Jesus grieved the direction of Jerusalem on a path to destruction. It was then and is now a good grief, a wake-up call to the children of God. It was the kind of grief that Jeremiah wept over his people, a prophetic grief that flows from the deep heart of God's sorrow over the corrupt and warring spirit of God's people. So, now as we view this violent and cruel world in the mirror of Jerusalem, let us grieve the deep and holy grief of Jesus. Let us grieve for what is and pray for what can be in the power of God's *shalom*.